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‘The Kindness of Strangers’: Kinship and Intertextuality in *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Una suerte pequeña*

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‘I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,’ Blanche DuBois remarks to her doctor at the end of Tennessee Williams’s 1947 play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Although tragically ironic in its original context — Blanche is being institutionalized after being raped by her brother-in-law and suffering a mental breakdown — the line has often inspired hope and humor in the years since. We encounter its translation in two works by artists who have shaped cultural representations of women in the Spanish-speaking world: Spaniard Pedro Almodóvar’s 1999 film *Todo sobre mi madre* and Argentine Claudia Piñeiro’s 2015 novel *Una suerte pequeña*. In both cases, the citation fosters kinship for displaced Argentine female protagonists who struggle to define themselves after the tragic death of a child. Almodóvar’s and Piñeiro’s characters rely on the kindness of strangers as they rebuild their lives and form new kinship bonds, outside the confines of conventional motherhood.

These works tell stories of women who go from a life of deep but unreflective love for their biological sons, move through a period of devastating loss, and create new lives with families of their choosing. Almodóvar’s protagonist, Manuela, sees her seventeen-year-old son Esteban killed in a car accident in Madrid. Shortly thereafter, she meets Huma Rojo (a Spanish actress performing the role of Blanche in *Streetcar*); the two form an almost immediate

friendship that begins with Huma telling Manuela that she has always depended on the kindness of strangers. Piñeiro's protagonist, Marilé Lauría, also meets a kind stranger, an American teacher named Robert, who quotes the same line and befriends her in the aftermath of a fatal accident that has led to Marilé abandoning her husband and her five-year-old son Federico.

In our analysis, this common citation is not a mere coincidence but rather has two central functions that prompt a comparative reading of the two works alongside one another. First, there is the literal meaning that one must be kind to strangers and take kindness from them, a notion that suggests the inadequacy of conventional family relationships. Both of these protagonists fail to find support in their established communities when attempting to cope with their grief. Instead, they must strike off on their own, traveling to new cities and encountering unknown people. It is through the great generosity of strangers that Manuela and Marilé (who later changes her name to Mary) are able to form new relationships oriented not around biological parentage or the idea of a self-sacrificing mother, but rather around alternative networks of mutual care. Through multiple journeys and encounters between long-lost parents and children as well as actual strangers, both works explore the multiple, complicated ways people can become family.

The second function of these works' citations of Tennessee Williams and other artists is to ask the protagonists to grapple with works of fiction, film, and drama in order to interpret the relationship between others' stories — particularly women's stories — and their own. Almodóvar and Piñeiro cite *Streetcar* and other intertexts in different ways that underscore salient thematic and aesthetic aspects of their own works: a film and a novel, respectively. *Todo sobre mi madre* includes scenes of Manuela and other characters acting out Williams' play as a way of working through the emotions of their real lives. Other moments of intertextuality are

also focused on performance: characters view a film about actresses, read aloud from a book, and stage the words of Federico García Lorca. The performative elements of this film at times incorporate elements of camp. As Patrick Garlinger has submitted, Almodóvar's use of camp in *Todo sobre mi madre* allows — perhaps paradoxically — for a sincere and authentic reflection on womanhood. Additionally, the presence of transgender characters Agrado and Lola highlights the constructed, performative nature of gender roles at this crucial time in Manuela's life as she seeks to redefine her own identity.

Intertextuality is present in Piñeiro's novel, meanwhile, through characters who interrogate the meaning of writing. Rather than watch or act out plays or movies, Marilé and her kind stranger deepen their friendship and process their grief by reading and discussing books, beginning with a Spanish-language copy of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *Una suerte pequeña* also incorporates several other intertexts in which characters grapple with motherhood and what it means to be a woman. Thus, in ways fitting for their respective artforms, both Almodóvar's film and Piñeiro's novel have their main protagonists engage with *Streetcar* and other works of fiction to grapple with what it means to be a woman once they cease to be mothers.

Like Williams, Piñeiro and Almodóvar are important voices for considering the cultural meaning of motherhood. In her earlier novels *Tuya* (2005) and *Elena sabe* (2007) Piñeiro wrote about women who are denied the choice of whether to become mothers because of Argentina's restrictive laws; she addresses the issue from a different angle in *Una suerte pequeña*, exploring how a woman might be forced to stop being a mother and might recover the role again. Piñeiro has advocated publicly for women's bodily autonomy, notably addressing the Argentine Senate in July 2018 to advocate for a bill that would have legalized abortion. For his part, Almodóvar's film production has revisited motherhood time and again. His acclaimed *¿Qué he hecho yo para*

merecer esto? (1984) deals with protagonist Gloria's miserable life as a housewife and her impending separation from her son. More recently, his 2016 film *Julieta* adapts a series of stories by Alice Munro (whose story 'The Children Stay' serves as an intertext for *Una suerte pequeña*) about a woman who loses both her husband and her daughter.[1] It thus comes as little surprise that Piñeiro and Almodóvar should find conceptual affinity with Williams' heartbreaking portrait of women's vulnerabilities in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and in particular with his consideration of what it means for a woman to rely on the kindness of strangers.

Motherhood as an Unexamined Script

In their lives as mothers before the tragedies, Manuela and Marilé have little interest in fiction, despite the fact that theater and reading had been important to them in their earlier years. We come to learn that both characters have painful, unconventional pasts that trouble their relationship with the roles as wife and mother; neither fits comfortably into a conventional bourgeois family. As a young woman, Manuela first left her native Argentina and then, pregnant, left her unfaithful partner in Barcelona for Madrid in order to raise her son alone. In suburban Buenos Aires, Marilé attempts to fit in with her husband's family and with the other stay-at-home moms, but they never fully accept her. Despite these tensions, neither character considers alternative ways to be a mother or a woman until the loss of their sons leaves them without an established path to follow.

[1] In his 2011 *La piel que habito*, Almodóvar shows character Vera Cruz reading *Escapada*, the Spanish translation of *Runaway*, from which he would later adapt *Julieta* (2016). In addition to his avowed admiration of Munro and his decision to adapt a series of her short stories for the screen, we see that Almodóvar shares thematic affinity with the Canadian author's recurrent themes of mothers separated from their children.

Manuela's and Marilé's struggles after they cease to be mothers evoke Julia Kristeva's notion that motherhood is often understood as the ultimate expression of femininity. Kristeva has at times been criticized by other feminist thinkers for locating feminine identity exclusively within the figure of the mother. Notably, Judith Butler charged that Kristeva's association of women with semiotic or pre-symbolic language, and even with psychosis, has the effect of silencing women, or rendering their voices incomprehensible (Butler 1999: 101-19). In her response to Butler Fanny Söderbäck shows, however, that Kristeva's view of motherhood serves as its own critique of the *unexamined* identification of woman with mother. Specifically, Söderbäck focuses on Kristeva's critique of the maternal in which 'woman is left with no other identities accessible to her other than Maternity in its idealised form' (2010: 5). As we show here, a normative model of motherhood and feminine existence (like the model that Kristeva articulates--and critiques--in *Stabat Mater*) is a script of femininity that these characters adopt and play out without questioning it. In contrast, once they cease to be mothers, they reflect critically and emotionally on texts.

More recent interventions have also called into question the assumptions on which we rest cultural understandings of motherhood's centrality for individuals who identify as women. In her 2014 essay *Contra los hijos*, Chilean writer Lina Meruane scrutinizes some of the ways cultural expectations of 'good mothers' have limited women's choices throughout the centuries and in diverse cultural contexts. Meruane's analysis shares conceptual affinity with American philosopher Shelley Park's consideration of queering motherhood by moving away from 'monomaternalism,' the normative idea that only one woman can be a child's mother. Park observes that 'The good mother/bad mother dichotomy [...] works to uphold the ideology of monomaternalism by giving us a personal stake in claiming to be a child's "real" mother and thus

the only mother who counts' (2014: 13-14). Meruane asserts: 'Las discrepancias entre unas y otras mujeres — feministas igualitarias, de la diferencia, esencialistas — podría parecer cosa de países súper-ultra-desarrollados (o de otro planeta), pero esta contradicción empieza a latir ahora por todas partes' (2018: 123). Meruane (who lives in New York) suggests a hegemonizing force of upper- and middle-class motherhood that stems from global centers of neoliberal culture and can now be observed in almost every country. Indeed, conflicts like 'playground politics' and 'mommy wars' that Meruane describes are quite prominent in the 1990s Argentina where Piñeiro's Marilé attempts to balance deep love for her son with crushing social pressure from her well-to-do neighbors. Manuela too struggles with other women's judgment in the 1990s Spain of *Todo sobre mi madre*.

Despite being released nearly two decades apart, the works both situate the period in which their protagonists are mothers in the 1990s, a decade marked by neoliberal policies that encouraged residents of economically peripheral nations like Spain and Argentina to see themselves as part of a global consumer market, and to value the advancement of the individual (or perhaps of the nuclear family) above the health of the local community. Marilé's motherhood years in a bourgeois neighborhood of Argentina recall the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989-1999), a period of speculation and untenable economic growth that led to the collapse of that country's economy in 2001, and that Piñeiro explored more deeply in her breakout 2005 novel *Las viudas de los jueves*.[2] *Todo sobre mi madre* — created, released, and set near the beginning of Spain's economic boom of the late 1990s — shows Manuela engaged in a career in technologically advanced medicine that has provided a comfortable lifestyle to herself and her son and that she would not have thought to leave before his death. Akin to Meruane's critique of motherhood in the context of globalization and development, Marilé's and Manuela's shared

[2] See Griesse (2013) on the economic valences of *Las viudas de los jueves*.

reluctance to question culturally scripted assumptions about motherhood may be understood as a function of the sociocultural codes of the spaces in which they are mothers.

These characters' losses underscore the untenability of monomaternalism, to which Park presents the alternative of 'polymaternalism.' Once they cease to be mothers within conventional nuclear families, Manuela and Marilé eventually enter into kinship models in which they share with other women the role of mother to children who are not biologically theirs. Park submits, 'polymaternal families (like polyamorous relations) might queer intimacy in both its psychological and its material dimensions' (10). Polymaternalism, in which the responsibilities and identities related to mothering are shared among various individuals, diminishes competition among women and allows for collaborative, intimate networks of care among multiple mothers. Park presents polymaternalism as a form of queering motherhood and mothering queerly. Likewise, the protagonists of these works come to form bonds that move away from monomaternalism and toward queer kinship networks.

The early scenes of *Todo sobre mi madre* show Manuela literally acting out the role of mother who has little choice over her own future. Almodóvar shows Esteban watching as Manuela acts out the role of the wife of a braindead patient for a training video for healthcare workers to broach the subject of organ donation. In this role, Manuela proclaims that her son is the only thing she has in the world as Almodóvar cuts to show Esteban entranced. Other workshop participants are asked to discuss what they have seen, but Manuela's part is simply to read the script she was given. The conversation is uncannily repeated minutes later in the film: the same individuals now carry out the same conversation but with the men in their previous professional roles as doctors and Manuela in the inescapably real position of a mother whose son

has been killed. But whereas the wife in the video had struggled to take in the news, Manuela understands as soon as one of her colleagues opens with the word, 'Desgraciadamente.' She begins sobbing and is unable to stand. Her immediate, bodily reaction to this one word shows that she is painfully aware of what must inevitably come next: the script cannot be changed.

Before the loss of her son, Manuela is reluctant to speak with him about other texts in which he is interested, all of which explore gender and sexuality. At the film's beginning, we see the two characters sit down to watch the movie *All About Eve* (Mankiewicz 1950), whose title has been translated as *Eva al desnudo*. Esteban gives her the literal translation, *Todo sobre Eva*, the inspiration for the title *Todo sobre mi madre*, which now appears on screen filling the negative space between Manuela and Esteban in the shot. Manuela remarks that the title sounds strange, to which Esteban responds with frustration over her lack of passion for the film. Later that evening, she gives him Truman Capote's *Music for Chameleons* as a birthday present because she knows that he admires Capote. Esteban asks Manuela to read aloud a passage from the preface; she obliges but responds dismissively to the words after reading them. The texts that Esteban shares with his mother are strongly associated with queerness, as is *Streetcar*, which they will soon watch together. *All About Eve* has been revered by generations of gay film fans, while Capote and Williams were both gay and became gay icons. Both Esteban's fascination with these cultural touchstones and the parallels between his story and that of Almodóvar suggest that he too may be gay or questioning —Stephen Maddison submits that he is 'coded but not named as such' (2000: 272) — and that he shares the texts with his mother as a way of asking her to accept queer people. Manuela's negative reaction marks a tension in their relationship that is exacerbated by her reluctance to talk about Esteban's father, who we will later learn is also queer. Esteban's subsequent death is therefore all the more painful because it means mother and

son will never have the opportunity to have this discussion, in which they could affirm their love and acceptance of each other.

Manuela does engage emotionally, however, in response to the performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* on the night of Esteban's death. After showing Blanche DuBois (portrayed by Huma, before Manuela meets her) telling her doctor she has always relied on the kindness of strangers, the film alternates between shots of Manuela and Esteban in the audience and the onstage performance in which Stella (played by Huma's lover, Nina) clutches her baby as she tells Stanley that she will never return to their home. After the performance, she informs Esteban that she once performed the role of Stella opposite his father's Kowalsky. She promises to tell him the rest of the story later, but he is killed before they can have that conversation. We will only learn much later in the film that Esteban's father, Esteban, had an operation to become a woman named Lola, or that Manuela (much like Stella) left the relationship out of frustration with Lola's unfaithfulness and misogyny. Despite Manuela's recognition of the dysfunctions of her past relationship, her silence during his life shows that she is reluctant to consider all the implications of her own relationship with the play. Thus we see that being a mother in a conventional sense has been predicated upon an unreflective adherence to a culturally assigned role.

Normative expectations of motherhood play an even stronger role in the life of Piñeiro's protagonist, Marilé. Raised in the city of Buenos Aires by a depressive mother who had lost a baby son, María Elena Pujol's whole life is marked by loss, and she has always felt herself to be different from her peers. Upon marrying Mariano Lauría, she takes his surname and the nickname Marilé and moves to his home in the suburb of Temperley, where she hopes to be embraced by a new community and find joy in raising a child. What she encounters instead is an

experience of isolation in her identity as her child's only mother, akin to Park's understanding of monomaternalism. The other mothers in Temperley do make a point of helping each other in contexts such as playdates, but they are motivated more by the need to keep up appearances than by solidarity or affective bonds with each other's children.

After years of not quite living up to others' expectations, Marilé fails completely when she becomes involved in an accident. Her car becomes stuck at a train crossing and, although she is able to rescue Federico, his friend Juan is trapped in the car and killed. Marilé learns that other parents believe the accident resulted in part from her inattention, perhaps caused by mental instability that they had noted long before (and which might be traced to her mother). Wracked by trauma and guilt, she wants to stay close to her son but finds that her husband and friends do not trust her to take care of him. Mariano's old flame, Martha, begins spending time in their home; after Marilé departs for the US, Martha eventually takes her place, blends their families, and raises Federico as her stepson. In this setting, monomaternalism is manifest to an extreme insofar as women are competing with one another to be the singular mother (and the best mother) in the eyes of a man in the role of father. Marilé's husband delivers the judgment of the community: 'Hay muchos tipos de madres. Algunas, cuando toman conciencia de que le pueden arruinar la vida a sus hijos, buscan la forma de evitarlo' (Piñeiro 2015: 163). The comment is paradoxical down to its syntax; while he is saying that there are many types of mothers, the latter half of his statement names only one: those who leave once they have realized that they are destroying their children's lives. He places his wife in the role of dangerous mother and leaves her only with the choice of leaving or staying, not with the option of *many* types of motherhood.

Conventional motherhood, as Mariano's comment suggests, affords a woman only one acceptable role and does not allow them to question it. He goes on to replace Marilé with

Martha, showing that he considers women to be interchangeable, merely playing a role as wives and mothers and not making choices as individuals. Marilé's background as a student of literature in Buenos Aires becomes irrelevant in this context, and she will only start to question the readings she is given again after moving in with Robert in Boston. Although Manuela is a single mother and appears to be respected as a professional in cosmopolitan Madrid, she too has been reluctant to question or change the script she is given until Esteban's death forces her to reevaluate her place in the world.

Tragedy, Texts, and Transformation

Tragedy and separation from their sons force these characters to reconsider their identities once they cease to be mothers, and both do so by reading, discussing, and/or acting in creative works about the meaning of womanhood. In particular, *A Streetcar Named Desire* provides a framework for understanding women's work as care work, an important aspect of cultural understandings of women as mothers. Within the play, Blanche's pregnant sister Stella takes care of Blanche in order to stave off a nervous breakdown. But while Stella is in labor, her husband Stanley rapes Blanche, who then suffers a psychotic break. Williams has Stella move from caring for another adult toward prioritizing her own biological child; the widowed, childless, and sexually promiscuous Blanche is abandoned and left to depend on the kindness of strangers. However, as Maddison has pointed out, Almodóvar's changes the ending of Willams's play by having the character playing Stella tell Stanley that she will never return to their home. This corresponds to changes Manuela, as well as Marilé/Mary, are able to make in their lives, moving from devotion to their biological sons toward establishing relationships of mutual care

with other adults. Only toward the end of these works are they able to reconcile caring for a young child with their lives as independent women.

After the loss of her son, Manuela's relationship to *Streetcar* changes to become more oriented toward other female characters. As a young woman she played Stella opposite her then male-identifying partner in the role of Stanley, but in this new production the man playing Stanley is laughable and unimportant. In the present, Manuela's attention is directed toward her new friends Huma as Blanche and Nina as Stella. And, although Nina accuses Manuela of being like the understudy Eve Harrington in *All About Eve*, in fact *Todo sobre mi madre* rejects the earlier film's vision of women as competitive and backstabbing. When an emergency leads to Manuela going on stage as Stella in place of Nina, she does so as an act of support for Huma and Nina. This performance is also shown to be cathartic for Manuela, as Almodóvar depicts her onstage as Stella wailing in pain as she goes into labor. As Maddison notes of the performance of *Streetcar* that Almodóvar shows (portions of) in the film, 'Women have options, experiences, opportunities, which don't include men' (268). Likewise, Manuela's new life, mediated through her relationship to other women and through *Streetcar*, is not predicated on a conventional model of nuclear motherhood that would necessarily include men.

Indeed, this new kinship network begins when Huma quotes the line, 'Siempre he confiado en la bondad de los desconocidos,' to Manuela. The audience, however, is already aware that Huma is not such a stranger to Manuela, since Huma was indirectly involved in Esteban's death. He was hit by a car while trying to follow her to ask for her autograph. Almodóvar's use of Blanche's most famous line serves to communicate that what may seem to be chance meetings and random kindnesses can truly be expressions of deep intimacy. The director has commented in an interview: 'It's also a film about the solidarity that exists between

women, but one that arises spontaneously in the course of life's trials — it's the glorification of a key line in *Streetcar*: "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers"' (Almodóvar 2006: 193). Almodóvar glorifies this line by foregrounding the importance of both giving and receiving kindness for people beyond Manuela's immediate family. The use of *Streetcar* is thus adaptive and therapeutic, not rote recitation.

Piñeiro, too, glorifies Williams's line from *Streetcar*. Fleeing from her life in Temperley, a despairing and nearly unresponsive Marilé rides on a plane from Buenos Aires to Miami, where the stranger sitting next to her (Robert) invites her to come to Boston and stay in his guest house. He adds, 'Quien depende de la amabilidad de los extraños es porque está solo en el mundo. Aunque de hecho está rodeado de gente. Si alguien depende de la amabilidad de un extraño es que quienes lo rodean no son gente con la que ha podido contar' (Piñeiro 2015: 177-78). Unlike Huma Rojo, who (always the actress) speaks as if she *were* Blanche, Robert adds his own interpretation to Williams's line and positions Marilé as Blanche, himself as the kind stranger. His commentary is apt, since Marilé has not been able to rely on kindness from her own family or social circle in Argentina.

Yet, as Robert later informs her, they are *both* relying on the kindness of strangers. He divulges his heartbreak over the loss of his brother in the Vietnam War, to which Marilé responds that she will tell him her own tragedy in due time, adding 'siempre he dependido de la amabilidad de los extraños' (Piñeiro 2015: 184). While Marilé utters this line to Robert in an attempt to foster solidarity and mutual understanding, her affirmation here also reminds us that he is relying on her for kindness in seeking empathy over the loss of his brother. Finally one evening he says to her, 'Usted me hace mucho bien' (188). She hugs him in an impulse that she describes as 'el primer impulso que tuve en mucho tiempo' (188). The older Mary as narrator

then informs us that after a while they began to live together and then became romantically involved.

Robert and Marilé's relationship is closely tied to their reading and discussion of texts that help them speak about family and loss and to build a relationship of mutual care and respect. Along with *Streetcar*, an equally important intertext for *Una suerte pequeña* is Alice Munro's 1997 short story 'The Children Stay', from which Piñeiro takes the novel's epigraph.

> Este dolor agudo. Se hará crónico. Crónico significa perdurará aunque tal vez no sea constante. También puede significar que no morirás de ello. No te librarás pero no te matará. No lo sentirás a cada minuto pero no permanecerás mucho tiempo sin que te haga una visita. Y aprenderás algunos trucos para mitigarlo o ahuyentarlo, tratando de no destruir aquello que tanto dolor te ha costado. (Piñeiro 2015: 9)

Munro's story tells of a married woman, Pauline, who leaves her husband and children for the younger man directing the play in which she is acting as an amateur. The title comes from a line of dialogue in which Pauline's husband insists that, although she may leave him, their children will stay with him, a parallel with Marilé's experience of being told she is unfit to care for Federico. The quoted passage from the Spanish translation, in which verbs conjugated in the future tense abound, echoes the condemnation with which God exiles Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (*NIV* Genesis 3:14). But even as Munro describes the suffering of mothers separated from their children, she offers them a manual for how to live with such profound pain. In *Una suerte pequeña*, when Robert encourages to Marilé to read 'The Children Stay', she rejects it angrily, disbelieving that her intense pain will ever diminish. She also points out that, unlike Pauline, she did not leave her family for another man. Robert's response is that they are not the same, but that everyone can see a piece of themselves in literary characters, and thus can

reflect on their own experience. Similarly, he makes room for interpretation and open questions when he gives her Simone de Beauvoir's *Une femme rompue*, telling Marilé that she is not a *broken* woman but a *damaged* woman, one whose life may eventually go on, even if it can never be the same as before the harm.

Wounds and damage characterize the relationships that these grieving mothers come to foster with strangers. Antonio Holguín equates wounded motherhood with solidarity among women in *Todo sobre mi madre*: 'Y la maternidad herida. Y la solidaridad espontánea entre las mujeres. 'Siempre he confiado en la bondad de los desconocidos', decía Williams por boca de Blanche Dubois [sic]. En *Todo*…, la bondad es de las desconocidas' (1999: 296). Holguín changes the gender of the strangers, associating kindness with wounded motherhood. Intellectual, emotional, and performative engagement with *A Streetcar Named Desire* and other creative texts helps to forge bonds between characters in both these works, with references to the kindness of strangers in particular allowing wounded characters to express a need to be cared for and a willingness to care for others.

Constructed Selves: Transnationality, Trans(formed) Femininity, and Queer Motherhood

Taking the lessons of intertextuality beyond reading and writing, Almodóvar's and Piñeiro's characters make conscious decisions to depart from the scripted roles that have been assigned to them by accidents of birth. Both Manuela and Mary were born in Argentina, but they adopt aspects of national identity of Spain and the United States, where they have spent most of their adult lives. Each woman's physical appearance is shaped by the genetic expressions with which she was born as well as by her own choices, as we see with Piñeiro's protagonist's changes in hair and eye color and with Almodóvar's transgender characters Agrado and Lola.

While Manuela and Marilé have had to suffer the loss of their biological children, they are able to create new relationships of mutual care through which they come to embrace a young child of another generation.

Almodóvar's and Piñeiro's protagonists have ambivalent relationships with their home country of Argentina that are bound up in death, birth, and the loss of their status as mothers. In both cases, they left Argentina approximately twenty years before the point where we first meet them. Marilé left Argentina in the 1990s and returns shortly after Robert's death in the 2010s. Manuela moved to Barcelona with her partner Esteban, presumably during the late 1970s and the violent military dictatorship led by Jorge Rafael Videla, although their reasons for leaving are not made explicit. These works couple nationality with biological motherhood, categories of identification from which their protagonists find themselves estranged. Manuela retains her Argentine accent but she and Lola have adopted the grammar and vocabulary of Spaniards,[3] while Mary uses an Anglicized version of her name and refers to herself as 'una mujer americana, una mujer de Boston' (16). Although Mary does briefly return to Argentina for professional reasons, both works end with their protagonists living in their adopted countries, where they have had space to construct identities that are not governed by their past relationships.

In addition to changing their nationality, characters in both works — Mary in *Una suerte pequeña* and the transgender characters Lola and Agrado in *Todo sobre mi madre* — make changes in their physical appearance to disrupt the notion of womanhood as passive or 'natural'. Such transformations serve to explore the interplay between an individual's authentic 'inner self'

[3] On the one hand, Manuela's use of dialectical variations typical of Madrid such as *tuteo* and *leísmo* and colloquial terms from Spain (such as 'gilipollas' and 'bolleras') may be an oversight on Almodóvar's part, since the role was originally imagined with a Spanish actress and only altered slightly after Cecilia Roth was cast. On the other, Manuela and Lola may have adopted such speech patterns after spending most of their adult lives in Spain.

and their outward appearance. Engaging with the notion of cosmetics as performative put forth by Judith Butler and others, Llewellyn Negrin acknowledges practices of cosmetics in which women's identities are predicated upon images constructed by the cosmetics they purchase. Negrin posits, 'one could argue that a cosmetic practice which promotes the view of the self as a series of changing guises is conservative insofar as it leaves unchallenged the reduction of self-identity to an image which is constructed by the commodities one buys' (91). We may liken Piñeiro's and Almodóvar's treatments of cosmetics to their treatments of motherhood; like motherhood, the use of cosmetics is a quintessentially feminine practice bound up in bourgeois social preoccupations. However, these works explore cosmetics and cosmetic surgeries so as to question assumptions about the female condition.

Todo sobre mi madre presents an array of outward gender expressions and women's reasons for altering (or not) their appearances as Manuela fosters new kinship bonds outside conventional gender categories. In particular, Lola and Agrado present two contrasting ways of becoming women. Lola retains a strong desire to father a child, long after her failings as a romantic partner influenced Manuela's decision to leave without telling Lola she was pregnant ('¿Cómo se puede ser tan machista con semejante par de tetas?' Manuela remarks as she recalls their story). Meanwhile, Agrado's identification as a woman is predicated almost exclusively on caring for others; in fact, she states at one point that she chose the name 'Agrado' for herself because her whole life she has always brought pleasure to others. When one performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* cannot go on, Agrado appears onstage to entertain the audience by telling her life story. She recounts the procedures that she has had done to her body, concluding: 'Una es más auténtica cuanto más se parece a lo que ha soñado de sí misma.' Although Agrado is speaking of her particular experience of gender transformation, her assertion is, as Kinder

comments ‘a line about subjectivity with which everyone can identify’ (2004-05: 17). Manuela herself uses only minimal makeup and her appearance changes little in the course of the film, but she too is approaching a more authentic version of herself as a woman who cares for and is cared for by others.

While none of Piñeiro’s characters change their gender presentation as drastically as Agrado and Lola, María Elena/Marilé/Mary’s appearance — specifically her hair and eye color — are marks of changing national and personal identity. As a young mother in Temperley, she highlights her hair blond in order to fit in with her social circle, but in Boston she cuts it short and lets her hair return to its natural color, at the same time beginning to use contact lenses to make her blue eyes appear brown. Upon her return to Argentina at the start of the novel, Mary uses her Anglicized name and relies on outward changes to her appearance in order to avoid being recognized. At one point a cashier seems to recognize her but then dismisses the possibility that she is Marilé, to whom she refers as ‘una porquería de mujer’ (Piñeiro 2015: 61). The phrase ‘porquería de mujer’ connotes that the women of Temperley not only disliked Marilé but saw her as failing in her role as a woman and mother, consistent with the message she was given by Mariano. But despite Mary’s considerable efforts not to be recognized as her former self, Federico, now a teacher in the local school, is able to identify her by a birthmark on her forearm. Her outward transformations have kept the judgment of strangers at bay but have not erased her identity as a mother in the eyes of her son.

In a final variant of transformation, these works’ protagonists create alternative family models. After Esteban’s death, Manuela befriends Huma and reconnects with Agrado (with whom she had been friends in Barcelona before moving to Madrid). She also becomes a surrogate mother to Rosa, a nun who does charity work with sex workers and — like Manuela

seventeen years earlier — has become pregnant with Lola's child. Rosa and Manuela's relationship is both suggestive of a mother-daughter relationship and carries a subtle hint at lesbian desire. In one conversation, Rosa states that she loves the word 'pollón;' the two erupt in laughter with Manuela embracing Rosa in a way that could be seen as either maternal or libidinous. Elsewhere, Manuela puts makeup on Rosa and comments, 'me gusta verte guapa.' Manuela has quickly gone from caring for her own biological son to caring for Rosa as a member of her queer family, which in different ways also comes to encompass Lola, Agrado, Huma, and in particular Rosa's baby (also named Esteban), whom Manuela adopts after Rosa's death in childbirth. The film ends with a scene set two years after the main action that reinforces the importance of queer, non-biological families. Manuela has taken baby Esteban to live in Madrid and his body has neutralized the HIV he inherited from Rosa. The disease that has so ravaged queer communities around the world, including the child's own biological parents, suddenly appears less powerful. Meanwhile, Huma and Agrado have formed a stable, loving relationship. We see in the final shots that Huma has kept in her dressing room a photo of Manuela's son Esteban, as if Huma has become a second mother for him. The shot contrasts with the beginning of the film, when the teenager yearned to know more about his missing queer parent, the missing half of Manuela's torn photograph. Despite Esteban's death, the ending with the intact photo in Huma's dressing room shows that his memory is well preserved and that he is loved within a queer polymaternal family.

While Manuela surrounds herself with a loving community of queer women in Barcelona, Mary forms a very different alternative bond with Robert Lohan in Boston. Their childless, common-law union escapes from heteronormative patterns and allows Mary to heal after her marriage bound by patriarchal structures. This experience also makes her more aware of

her inclinations to care for others and her option not to do so. On her flight back to Argentina at the novel's beginning, an older woman who is uncomfortable traveling is seated next to her. Once they land in Buenos Aires, Mary notes that the woman seems to be seeking her out for guidance. Mary reflects: 'Me conmueve que esa mujer dependa de mí. Hace mucho que nadie depende de mí. Supe cuidar, acariciar, hacer dormir, estar atenta a cada cosa que el otro necesitaba. Pero hace mucho que eso no me sucede, no volví a permitir que me sucediera' (31). Here we see Mary's contradictory relationship to motherhood: she has declined to take care of others' needs, yet still finds herself moved by recognizing that this fellow traveler needs her.

Mary and Robert's relationship of equals helps prepare her for an unexpected reunion with her son and eventual kinship with his family. Federico states that his wife Ariana '[e]studia Letras, todavía no se recibió, y ahora con la beba se va a retrasar un poco,' a phrasing that takes for granted that the mother will prioritize caring for her child above her studies (80). Federico, meanwhile, has chosen teaching rather than his father's more lucrative career in medicine. He also states that he will help Ariana finish her studies, which Mariano did not do for Marilé. Still, while rejecting the harshest parts of his upbringing, Federico has only chosen a softer version of a traditional household. He is the financial provider and his wife is the primary caretaker. In the final pages of the novel, when the family comes together in Boston after the exchange of writings has brought their pasts into the open, it is the young mother Ariana who encourages Mary to hold the baby Amelia. This moment prompts Mary to recall the day her son was born when, overcome with uncertainty, she handed him over to his father Mariano rather than hold him herself. No longer burdened by the unrealistic idea of motherhood that Mariano once placed on her, she now takes hold of Amelia, accepting her own fear and imperfections in order to experience the joy of the encounter.

Neither Piñeiro nor Almodóvar posits that a new setting, changed physical appearance, or a lovingly queer relationship can solve their protagonist's problems. Rosa's and Robert's deaths leave Manuela and Mary with a fresh new grief to join the pain (now made 'persistent, but perhaps not constant', in Munro's words) of the loss of their sons (1997: 103). Yet it is implied that they are better equipped to cope with such problems because of their meaningful engagement with others' stories and the new bonds into which they have come to enter with others that exceed the limits of nuclear, heteronormative families.

Conclusion

In *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Una suerte pequeña*, Almodóvar and Piñeiro expand on the work of other artists such as Tennessee Williams and Alice Munro to expose the false choices offered to women and to create new models of women who strike out on their own path. To be sure, these female protagonists' lives are far from ideal (i.e. no one would want to end their story as Blanche DuBois does). Yet as Robert explains to Marilé in *Una suerte pequeña*, the books he gives her are not meant to be exact matches to her experience, but rather sources of emotional recognition, reflection, and inspiration. And while no one would choose to suffer the loss of a child, Manuela's and Marilé's respective stories provide insight into what choices women do have, how much of our lives are scripted and settled, and how much can still be remade.

These works differ from the earlier works that inspired them in their use of translation and their centering of transnational Hispanic characters. Kindness among strangers, they show, extends across languages, borders, and gender expressions. Most of the important intertexts in both *Todo sobre mi madre* and *Una suerte mi madre* were originally written in English in different cultural contexts, yet these characters are able to read, identify with, and use them.

Whether Blanche's signature phrase is spoken in English or in Spanish, whether it appears as 'la bondad de los desconocidos' or 'la amabilidad de los extraños,' and whether spoken with a Castilian, Argentine, or North American accent, matters little; but the meaning of the phrase, while adaptable to each character's situation, is indispensable. We also note that in both works this line is cited by a native of the country toward a foreigner: Spaniard Huma Rojo casts herself as Blanche in response to Argentine Manuela's offer of help, and American Robert Lohan offers his help to Argentine Marilé. National difference, these characters tell us, is not an impediment to kindness.

In the act of embracing other women's children and rejecting monomaternalism, Manuela and Mary are able to heal from earlier experiences of trauma, particularly the birth and loss of their sons. Mary remembers Federico's birth before she holds her granddaughter for the first time in the Boston airport — a site of transition and new beginnings that recalls her desperate flight from Argentina to the United States, her first meeting with Robert in Miami, and her return journey es in the opening chapters of the novel. For his part, Almodóvar marks the repetition of Manuela's journeys between Barcelona and Madrid with a repeated shot of a train going through a tunnel that, as Susan Martin Márquez points out, 'evokes travel down the birth canal' (504). But while their earlier experiences of mothering were framed by passivity, betrayal, and the need to escape, this time they are making the choice to take on a kind of motherhood again and to turn babies from strangers into family. For Martin Márquez, '*Todo sobre mi madre* suggests that this is a model of mothering that many might be capable of adopting — including men. Indeed, multiple paradigms of motherhood emerge under the sign of rebirth in this film' (505). As Martin Márquez suggests, *Todo sobre mi madre* unmoors motherhood from a one-to-one correlation with femininity. Likewise, *Una suerte pequeña* has Mary enter a childless union with Robert and

ends with the introduction of a polymaternal kinship model made of Mary, her son, and her daughter-in-law. Almodóvar and Piñeiro thus articulate models of womanhood determined by personal models of alternative kinship rather than by conventional norms of nuclear families.

Motherhood and women's care work become a choice for these characters rather than a foregone conclusion. The choice to be a mother or not, as Piñeiro and Almodóvar show through their characters' trajectories, is not as simple as the act of giving birth. One's identity as a woman becomes the product of sustained attention to other people and their stories, both through strangers they meet in person and through texts and performance. Their emphasis on questioning and reinterpreting received models of what it means to be a woman or to be a mother dovetails with Meruane's work in *Contra los hijos*. Despite her provocative title, Meruane seeks not to argue against motherhood or children per se, but rather to reactivate the question of motherhood as a default condition for women. Despite other significant advances in feminist thought, she writes, 'observo con alarma que la cuestión de los hijos no ha prosperado. Todo lo contrario, experimenta un grave retroceso' (19). As Meruane states, motherhood is often still taken for granted in women's lives. Yet we must consider, as Marilé and Manuela are forced to do, unscripted motherhood that is the product not of complacency within hegemonic roles of class and gender but rather of thoughtful reflection and personal agency. The kindness of strangers and the kinship bonds formed on the basis of this kindness provide these women the choice to be mothers on their own terms.

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